

TEF Special Edition

Against the TEF: For Quality Learning

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In this piece, I argue for reclaiming concepts like teaching excellence and quality and developing an alternative discourse to that of the fatally-flawed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

Keywords: Teaching Excellence Framework; TEF; Critical Pedagogy; Quality Learning.

In the 1930s Jawaharlal Nehru observed that the Indian Civil Service under British colonial rule was 'neither Indian nor civil nor a service'. Such a critique is equally appropriate to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which, despite its misleading title, makes no attempt to evaluate directly either teaching or students' learning experiences. The interaction between students and their tutors is outside its remit; instead, it seeks to evaluate through proxy metrics: student satisfaction, retention and graduate employment (Forstenzer, 2016).

Student satisfaction is to be measured through National Student Survey (NSS) scores. Even before being given this increased importance, the NSS has often been gamed and already distorts the focus of institutions: as Joanna Williams (2015) has highlighted, it has 'become detrimental to learning, teaching and higher education.' Students have different learning styles and increasingly complex lives. That a university course satisfies the aspirations of an eighteen-year-old, privately-educated student dripping in social capital is of little relevance to the working-class single mother returning to education in her thirties. The NSS and the league tables that flow from it operate on the presumption that not only is a university education a homogeneous product but also that it should be one.

The second indicator is to be retention rates. The selection of this depends on the premise that is always best for a student to complete her/his degree. However, for students on the wrong course, or at the wrong institution, or at university at the wrong time, this may not be true. The TEF's focus on retention also further incentivises institutions to maximise pass rates at a programme and module level (even at a cost to academic standards) and to guard against risky recruitment. Students who pose a high risk of failure – mature students, those with caring responsibilities, those with disabilities and those without traditional academic qualifications – will be weeded out.

The final metric is graduate employment. This is determined by several factors, many of which the quality of teaching can never influence. Social capital - connections available through family and former schools - are unevenly distributed across the university sector. This, like the other metrics, will perpetuate society's existing structural inequalities by rewarding the universities which recruit the most privileged students.

My critique of the TEF is hardly original (Patterson, 2015). However critique is not sufficient, we urgently need to imagine an alternative and develop a counter discourse, that reclaims concepts like educational 'quality', 'excellence' and 'value' for a democratic, participatory and critical pedagogy. To start a debate on what this might look like, may I make some provisional suggestions:

1. Firstly, we should reject the idea that different universities can be directly compared. Each university should have its own distinct mission, philosophy and purpose. Widening participation requires greater diversity within higher education so that we can cater for the full spectrum of students. It is diversity rather than league tables which will give real choices to students.
2. Universities and their staff need to learn about their students' lives. With the exception, perhaps, of those attending elite institutions, the lives of students are becoming increasingly complex, with consequent impact upon their ability to engage fully with academic life (Paired Peers Project, 2013). Knowing this, we should re-engineer how we deliver HE so that it is genuinely accessible all students, not just middle-class kids funded by the bank of mum and dad.
3. Within institutions and teaching teams, we should be more proactive in promoting a critical pedagogy, in order to enable quality learning. How we teach and how students learn should be negotiated with students. Students must realise that higher education should challenge them and teaching staff must sharpen their awareness of their students' learning needs. It is incumbent upon us to welcome the experiences our students bring with them and take seriously their critiques of the curriculum.
4. University leaders need courage. Increasingly, they have become willing agents of government policy. The limp acceptance of the Prevent agenda (which, as well as threatening the integrity of our relationship with Muslim students, curbs free speech and

open debate), is sadly not an isolated example (Lister et al, 2015). Universities should be refocused to serve their communities, not the state.

The TEF will go ahead. Gold, Silver and Bronze status for teaching 'quality' will be allocated to those who play the game. These will reflect the existing higher education hierarchy and help perpetuate wider social inequalities. The 'better' universities will be rewarded by being allowed to increase their fees. The quality of teaching and learning, perverted to adapt to the new metrics, will decline. However, the TEF's hegemony need not be uncontested if we work with students to create genuinely participatory learning communities based on social justice values. To do this is to build a resistance to the TEF, based on an alternative discourse on what constitutes quality higher education learning.

Reference list

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